

Missions: Whose Work Is It Anyway?



NOTE: This article is excerpted from lectures at BMW Pastors Summit by and interviews with Pastor Robert L. Alderman, *Pastor at Large, Shenandoah Baptist Church – Roanoke, Virginia*

Pastor, I'd like take a few moments and ask you a question. It's a question that I asked myself several years ago while pastoring Shenandoah Baptist Church. It's a question that ended up taking me on a different path in my ministry in a way I could not have imagined.

A Real Ministry Scenario

Let me paint a scenario for you in which to frame the question. Consider two young people who grow up in the same local church. Both are taught missions, and both are aware of the significance of being a part of a mission-minded church. Both prosper in Christian nurture, growth, and service. Both attend the same highly-approved Bible college and seminary. During the time of their education, one student senses the call to go into cross-cultural ministry, and he prepares for that type of ministry. The other student senses the call to prepare for a hometown pastoral ministry and does so.

They both graduate at the same time and call their church pastor for advice and counsel as to the next steps. Here is where the story changes:

- To the person preparing for hometown ministry, the pastor says, "We are so glad to hear that you have been called to this ministry. We're sending you a check to cover your moving expenses. We have an office for you. Your salary will be as we have discussed; plus, you will have the same benefits package as the rest of the staff. Welcome to the ministry."
- To the person preparing for a cross-cultural ministry, the pastor says, "We are so glad to hear that you have been called to this ministry. You will need to select a mission board to help you raise prayer and financial support. When you have selected a field, please contact us, and we will do our best to have you speak to our congregation about the work to which God has called you. We wish you every success and will be praying for you. Welcome to the ministry."

While I may have taken some liberty with the specific details of the above scenario, I believe I have accurately stated a dichotomy that happens all too frequently in hundreds of local churches today. Here is my question:

*Why do we preach missions as a priority
and respond to missions' needs and opportunities as options?
Why is the work at home "ours" and the work abroad "theirs"?*

When I became pastor of Shenandoah Baptist Church, we followed the approach outlined above. So entrenched were we in what we had been taught that it did not occur to us that it should be challenged. Yet, the deeper I got into the process for bringing people into the ministry, the more questions it raised in my mind and heart. *Is this process biblical? How did it develop? Is there a better and biblical way?*

The Contemporary Norm

After significant study it became clear to me that the evangelical church, even since the Reformation, and especially since the days of William Carey, has not been willing to examine its responsibility to world missions. While some local churches have accepted their opportunity and responsibility for world missions and evangelism, the vast majority of our local Bible-believing congregations still treat missions as an option and missionaries as orphans. As a local church pastor, I became convinced this needed to change and became determined to do so.

The first step I took was to change my attitude. Then I needed to lead the church and our missionary friends to change theirs. The problem that I saw was that our view of missions had been shaped by our evangelical heritage; we assumed that the way missions had been done in the past is the way it should be done today. Missions was the work of boards, agencies, and individuals. The local church was not expected to do anything but respond to requests for prayer and funds. Missionaries and boards would do everything else. The local church had no other responsibility but to support them in their work. Accordingly, the praying and giving of the church would be incidental and, in the end, insufficient.

I realize that the above is an over-simplification, and you may feel it is unduly harsh. I hope the point is clear: I saw very little ownership in the local church for missions except as another program. As I began to ponder this approach to missions that I had been taught and had believed was the only biblical approach, I began to see a much different role for the local church to play, and my attitude about missions began to change. I'm delighted to report that over the years I was pastor at Shenandoah the attitude of the church also changed. The blessings that God has given us have been more than we could have ever dreamed.

The Biblical Norm

Our traditional approach to missions was to respond to missionaries on deputation who had either written or called. We were reacting rather than acting in the recruitment of our

missionaries. Most of these candidates were unknown to us except by letter, phone, and referrals. Through such information gathering, we learned where these missionaries were going and what they planned to do. We knew they were in the process of raising support for their work. They would come to our church at their instigation or our invitation. We had a heart for missions and we wanted involvement with them. But the problem was still with us: the work of missions was still their work and not primarily that of the local church. This is where we changed our attitude.

If the work of world missions belonged to us as a local church, as it is taught in the Scriptures, then we could no longer treat missions as an appendage, option, or burden. It was to be our central business and deserved center stage in all that we did. "Foreign" missions must be taught, administered, and funded right along with the rest of everything else we refer to as the church's work. Today missions is the heartbeat of Shenandoah Baptist Church, not an annual point of emphasis. It took several years to reach this place in our ministry. How did we accomplish this, and what does it look like? In the rest of this article, I'll outline six steps that we have taken in faith and which the Lord has blessed in changing our entire ministry.

Step 1: *We refer to our missionaries as "staff."* This terminology helped us focus our responsibility for them. They could see their relationship with us was more than that of a "supporting church." Instead, the missionary became a supporter of the ministry of the local church and its strategy for ministry. A question then came up: if the church hires other staff as full-time, then why not do the same for missionaries? We decided we need to treat our missionaries the same, with profound implications outlined next.

Step 2: *We choose the missionary staff.* We look for God to raise up missionaries within our congregation. We have a process that starts with identifying potential missionaries at an early age and provide multiple training opportunities. Should they hear God's call for missions and finish formal seminary training, they are invited to live and work with the local church for an extended internship. During this time the candidates minister in the local church and are observed and nurtured in personal growth patterns and personal relationships. Gifts, abilities, strengths, and weaknesses are evaluated. We do partner, on a limited basis, with other churches or agencies in sending our missionaries; they, too, must work with us during an extended internship so that we can move to the next step.

Step 3: *We match the missionary staff to a field targeted by the local church.* We work with boards, agencies, and missiologists to keep us informed of desired targets for missionary work. These specialists certainly know more about those needs than does the local church, so we depend on them for information. At the same time the church knows more about its staff. By our matching the knowledge of a missions' agency with the staff knowledge of our church, a more effective and strategic placement can be made.

Step 4: *We choose the agency to which our staff will be assigned.* This is a three-way decision that includes the church, agency, and staff. Using this approach, a three-way bond of interdependence and responsibility is established.

Step 5: *We delegate authority to the agency and instruct the staff to be accountable to the agency.* There are some limits to this delegation. By not delegating all authority, we, as the sending church, maintain the church's responsibility to both the mission and the missionary.

Step 6: *We fully fund the work.* We fund our missionary staff at 100% just as we do all of our staff. This is a matter of faith. In the few cases where we have partnered with another church, we generally encourage the sending church to provide 51% of the support so that the accountability relationship is clear between the sending church and the missionary. Some have raised a question about the inability of some churches to fully support a missionary. There are many ways I respond to this concern, but let me raise one question: *Is it proper for fifty or one-hundred people to say 'We can't support YOU' while saying to one 'YOU must raise your support'? Whose work is this, anyway?*

Conclusion

You may well be asking, "Pastor, does this really work? If so, how did you do it?" The results we have seen from this approach to missions have been most gratifying. Let me outline just a few. First, the church congregation is heavily involved with our missionaries throughout the year. Many of our missionary staff we call home each year for the annual missions conference (which is THE event of the year). It's like family returning home because they ARE family. We have moved beyond the sending-the-check-and-reading-monthly-prayer-letter phase. When I'm asked "How many missionaries do you support?" my answer is "None...our missionaries support the church."

Second, we have seen our overarching purpose become to glorify God, and missions become the overarching ministry of our church. This results in the blessings of seeing the Gospel taken to the outermost parts of the world.

This brief article cannot address all problems we encountered and how we solved them. Neither does this excerpted material pretend to address all questions that may be raised about the issues discussed in the Pastors Summit. I won't say it was easy. I will say that it has been worth it all. Perhaps it will stimulate your thinking to seriously address the question brought to my heart over 30 years ago: Missions: Whose work is it anyway?